

THE CIRCUIT WRITER

Historical Society
Northern New Jersey Conference
The United Methodist Church



Barbara Brooks Tomblin
Editor

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HISTORIC METHODIST SITES IN NORTHERN NEW JERSEY

William T. Noll

AN INTRODUCTION

In this year's *Circuit Writer*, the annual publication of Historical and Archival Society of Northern New Jersey, we are featuring an article by William T. Noll recounting some highlights from an anonymous author's manuscript, "The Great Camp Meeting." Written after 1879, the article describes two early camp meetings at Rahway in 1818 and 1819.

Last year the Trustees of the Historical and Archival Society presented our members with a ballot of nominees for Conference Historic sites. The three sites chosen were the Frankford Plains Methodist Church, the McCullough House, Asbury, and Drew University, Madison. A description of each of our new Conference historic sites is included in the following pages.

To continue this celebration of Methodism in Northern New Jersey the Trustees have again nominated a list of historic locations and invite members to choose three from the description and vote for them on the ballot enclosed in this publication.

We are also highlighting our annual meeting which will be held at Calvary Roseville Church on Saturday, April 25, 1998. The theme for this year's meeting is "Providing A Home." The program will feature two presentations and a tour of one of the Methodist homes. Dr. Frank Dennis will speak to our members about the history of Methodist Homes in New Jersey and Frank Ostertag will present a talk on other senior housing projects in New Jersey that are sponsored by the United Methodist Church. These presentations will be followed by a tour of Bishop Taylor Manor conducted by Gertrude Kehleay.

Barbara B. Tomblin, Ph.D.
Editor

Northern New Jersey is an area rich in historical sites of particular significance to American Methodism. From the early preaching of George Whitefield; to the many visits of Bishop Francis Asbury; to the establishment of hundreds of local churches and such institutions as Drew University, Centenary College, Mount Tabor Camp Meeting, Goodwill Industries, United Methodist Homes and Aldersgate Center; and even today continuing with the development of various new urban and ethnic ministries, we United Methodists of the Northern New Jersey Conference have a wonderful story to tell and celebrate. One way to tell the story is to recognize some of the sites in our conference of particular historical significance.

In the 1960's, two sites, the Morristown and Asbury United Methodist Churches, were recognized as "Conference Historic Sites." Last year, in our newly reformatted *Circuit Writer*, the Trustees of the Historical and Archival Society nominated additional locations for designation as Historic Sites, each of which was described briefly in the *Circuit Writer*. Members of the society were given a ballot with their *Circuit Writer* and asked to vote for three choices. The three locations receiving the most votes, Drew University, the Frankford Plains United Methodist Church and the McCullough House in Asbury, have now been designated as Conference Historic Sites as well.

This year, the trustees have once again nominated sites for this honor. Each is described briefly below. A ballot is included in this journal; any member of the Historical and Archival Society is eligible to vote. Please return your ballot with your three selected choices to Dr. William Noll, 37 East Allendale Avenue, Allendale, NJ 07401, along with suggested sites for future ballots.

Nominees

Bethany Church, Fort Lee and Christ Church, East Rutherford. Bishop Hae-Jong Kim established Northern New Jersey's first chartered Korean-American congregation while pastor at Fort Lee and East Rutherford in the 1960's. Today, that congregation, Korean Community U.M.C., worships in Leonia. Christ Church emerged from the merger of two congregations in East Rutherford: Wesleyan and Carlton Hill. The Fort Lee church is also the original site of Bethany Church, Wayne, one of the largest congregations in our conference.

Centenary College, Hackettstown. Centenary was chartered in 1867 to celebrate the one hundredth anniversary of American Methodism, and opened seven years later. Several sessions of Annual Conference have been

held at the college. Puera Robison, one of the first ordained women in the Methodist Episcopal Church, was a teacher at Centenary in the 1920's.

Cummins House and Vienna Church. Bishop Asbury visited and stayed here often, and preached in the kitchen of this farmhouse, where services were held before the construction of the first church building, begun in 1810. Just down the street from the Cummins House is the sanctuary of the Vienna Church, built in 1854 on the site of the original chapel, and the church cemetery, which contains the remains of many notable early Methodists.

First Church (Halsey Street and Central Churches), Newark. First Church was the product of a merger between two historic Newark congregations. Halsey Street Church, founded in 1808, was the original Methodist congregation in the city, visited often by Bishop Asbury. Halsey Street Church produced two bishops, Isaac W. Wiley and Charles L. Mead. Central Church was the home church of Bishop James N. Fitzgerald. Stephen Crane, author of *The Red Badge of Courage*, was the son of a Central Church pastor. After the congregation disbanded, First Church's ministry continued in the Wesley Towers senior citizen home.

Franklin-St. John Church, Newark. St. John Church, established in 1869, is the oldest African-American congregation in Northern New Jersey, and is regarded as the "mother church" of African-American congregations in our conference, having established mission congregations in Newark, East Orange and Montclair. In 1971, St. John Church merged with the Franklin congregation, which traces its history to 1830. The building on the present site was constructed in 1931 by the Franklin congregation.

Goodwill Industries, Jersey City/Harrison. Across America, Goodwill Industries is one of the most familiar ecumenical missions to the disabled. As happened nationally, Goodwill in New Jersey got its start as a Methodist urban mission. It traces its beginnings to Italian and Slavic ministries operated out of two row houses in Jersey City, across from the present parsonage of the Lafayette Church. Goodwill is now headquartered in a spacious building in Harrison, with branch stores around the state.

Kingwood Church and Pulpit Rock, Kingwood. Methodist preachers, including Bishop Asbury, have preached from Pulpit Rock since 1776, before the American Revolution. The local landmark is the property of the nearby Kingwood U.M.C., which dates from that time.

Morrell House, Chatham. Thomas Morrell served as an officer in the Revolutionary army before becoming a Methodist preacher. His sermon at the Chatham home of his uncle Jacob in the 1780's resulted in the estab-

lishment of the Chatham congregation. George Washington stayed at Morrell House when it served as the headquarters of General John Sullivan during the Revolutionary War.

Mount Bethel Church, Mount Bethel. Bishop Asbury gave Mt. Bethel its name on one of his many visits to the area. A beam from the church where Asbury preached is incorporated in the present building. Richard Cummins, one of George Washington's Revolutionary War physicians is buried in the church cemetery.

Simpson Church, Perth Amboy. Bishop Asbury first arrived and preached in our conference in Perth Amboy in 1772. The church is located just a short stroll from the harbor where Asbury landed. Almost a hundred years later, members of the congregation began an early ministry with Norwegian and Danish speaking immigrants, resulting in the formation of Wesley Church, now located in Edison.

Wesleyan Chapel, Califon. This wing of the Califon church first constructed in 1824, was originally located in Oldwick, and is the oldest church building still in use in our conference. In 1866, the Oldwick congregation built and dedicated a new, larger sanctuary. The next winter, the old chapel was dismantled, moved by wagon, and rebuilt at Califon in 1867 as that congregation's first sanctuary.

Wesley Church, Belleville. Founded by Margaret Dow, this congregation predates the American Revolution and is the mother church of many congregations in the area, including Methodism in Newark. Asbury preached in Belleville many times, beginning in 1774, and Thomas Morrell was the congregation's first pastor.

NEW CONFERENCE HISTORIC SITES

THE PLAINS CHURCH

Many years before the Declaration of Independence was written, people were meeting in a little log church in what is now the Frankford Plains Cemetery. Men carried their guns to church to protect their families from the wild animals as well as the Indians who roamed the area. Records show that the log church was built in 1710 and was undoubtedly the first church of any denomination in Sussex County. Old church records listing the names of the ministers of this church would indicate that it was possibly founded by those of the Lutheran denomination. This first log church was replaced in 1750 by the same society which had built the original building. By 1787 it appears that the church came under the control of the Methodist Society as records show that Thomas Merrill, a Methodist preacher licensed by Bishop Asbury, preached here in that year. He was followed by L. D. Bently and then by John Discona. These men had been soldiers in Washington's command at Valley Forge. Bishop Asbury preached here as well.

A second church also stood in the cemetery, but was nearer the present entrance. After 50 years that building was torn down and the lumber was used for a barn on a farm about two miles from the site of the church.

A third church building was erected on the opposite side of Plains Road from the cemetery and between the present church and the road. The recorded deed for the property is dated March 1, 1809. The building was to be called The Frankford Union Meeting House. Services were held by several church societies at alternating times, according the size of the group with a majority. However, it was stated that no one society could hold meetings consecutively.

This Old Plains Church is referred to in the histories of Sussex and Warren Counties with dates between 1800 and 1830. B. B. Edsal in his Centennial Address said the first Methodist Church in Sussex County was built around 1810. He is probably referring to this building. This church was torn down in 1860 and its building materials had the appearance of having been there for fifty years. So, any of the above dates makes this church the first Methodist Church in Sussex County.

That 35 x 45 foot church was described as a large building plainly made and furnished with pine benches which were painted white. After the foundation was completed, there was no further need for mason work as there was no plastering. The interior was sealed with pine boards painted white. The seats were also pine boards the backs of which were two slats four inches wide set a foot apart. Seats on the right were reserved for the women and those on the left for the men. Heat was supplied by two box stoves, one on either side of the meeting house. A pipe from each stove led to a drum near the center of the building and a pipe from this drum went

up through the roof. There was a gallery on three sides which would seat more people than many of the churches of that day. The pulpit was elevated eight feet. It was a tight enclosure with a door at one side reached by a winding stairway. Above the pulpit was a cone shaped structure five feet in diameter and six feet above the pulpit. This was the old-fashioned sounding board.

When this third church was built, there was a mistake made in the location of the building and one side was found to extend on to the adjoining farm a few feet. This later gave the Methodist Society a great deal of trouble. The farmer who owned the land claimed to be part owner of the church, and he declared it open to any and all denominations and free to either male or female pastors. The Methodists claimed it was their building since they had paid for its construction. They proposed moving the building the few feet necessary to clear the line. To prevent this, the "Free Church" party fastened the building with chains and locks attached to posts set six feet into the ground. The large staples, eight in number, remained in the sills until the church was torn down. However, the posts rotted away and the chains and locks were gone. At one point, the "Free Church" group attempted to move the church to their side of the property line. To prevent this, the Methodists fastened it with lock and chains to a tree five or six yards distant. There was even talk of sawing the building apart, but neither happened. The trouble was ended when the adjoining farm passed into the hands of Christopher Haggerty, who let the Methodists have control of the building they had erected. In 1860, when the old building was torn down and sold, the question of title was raised again. A title search proved it really belonged to the Methodists.

The fourth Plains Church, the present building, was built by James H. Williamson for a contracted sum of \$2,000.00. The cornerstone was laid in June 1860. H. J. Hillard delivered the address at the ceremony. The building was dedicated on January 31, 1861. John Scarlett preached at the morning service, William Tunison in the afternoon and H. J. Hillard in the evening. At this time the church was declared free of debt.

Rev. Nelson was pastor in 1864-65. During his pastorate, the church was divided on the issue of the Civil War. The opposition hired Garrett Van Horn to preach for them in the Plains Schoolhouse.

In 1866 Frankford Plains and Branchville were placed on the same charge with J. H. Runyon the appointed pastor. His ministry was distinguished by a great revival. It began with a three day meeting and was continued for several months. The converts numbered over one hundred and seventy, with one hundred forty-two later joining the church. In 1893 the Plains Church became a separate charge.

1911 was an outstanding year in the life of the church. The women of the church started a project to build a shed to protect the horses of the parishioners while they attended services. In 1925, that shed became "The Community House" through donations of sums as low as twenty-five cents

from people in the area. The building has served as a place of worship while the church interior was renovated. The Township has used it for overflow classes from the school. Groups from other churches have used it for retreats. Wedding receptions, reunions and luncheons have also been held there. At one time, it was used by a church member whose home was damaged by fire to store his furniture until his home was repaired. We must not forget the famous Fish and Chip suppers begun in 1953 which continue to the present time. The year 1911 also saw the removal of the plain glass windows from the sanctuary. They were replaced by seven stained glass windows. That same year marked the arrival of the bell to call folks to worship. The bell was purchased from the Cincinnati Foundry and was shipped by rail to the Augusta Station. It was delivered to the church by horse and wagon and installed in the belfry. The bell weighs 1100 pounds.

A fire from an overheated stove damaged the interior of the sanctuary in 1915. During the repairs, the balcony was removed and the two entrances replaced by one double door.

It was in 1936 that electricity came to the area. The electric service was placed underground in 1977. An oil burning furnace replaced stoves in 1954.

In January 1957, Rev. and Mrs. Roberts and daughter became the first residents of a new church parsonage. Ground was donated by Mr. and Mrs. Linden Smith Sr. and the parsonage was constructed by Howard Strait. A well was also drilled that still supplies the three present buildings. Now at last the church had a home for its pastor.

In 1965 the church purchased the octagonal school building which had been converted into a family dwelling. With the purchase of this building from the Linden Smith family came 3.15 acres which the Smith family donated to the church. The church now owns 5 full acres.

The interior of the sanctuary was paneled in 1969 and aluminum siding was added to the exterior in 1977. A large wooden cross and pulpit rock were located in the field where Easter sunrise services are held each year. This has also been the site of beautiful outdoor weddings. The pews in the church have been changed many times over the years. They have been several different colors and have been located in various ways. A shed over the entrance was removed and new doors installed in 1983. In March of 1985 the shingle slate roof was found to be in very poor condition especially around the area of the belfry. It was decided to remove the bell and the belfry and replace the roof and erect a large cross on the roof. A place for installation of the bell at ground level was provided. It was removed on March 25, 1985 and the roof work was completed.

The church's interior has gone from lath and plaster to matched siding to paneling. Music has been furnished by someone with a pitch pipe, an old pump organ, a piano and now an electronic organ. Prophets have predicted that the church would go down and be abandoned, but from each low point it has again sprung up stronger than ever. There have always been friends

to come to its rescue. 285 years is a long time, but the church is still alive at Frankford Plains. As one church went down another rose in its place. Upon these grounds many feet have followed the remains of dearest friends and family to their last resting place. At these altars many have been joined in marriage and many have received pardon and rejoiced in the light of new life. To these churches many hearts, weighed down by trials and sorrows, have come to find solace. From these walls many voices have been raised in praise to Almighty God. We agree with a writer of the past—"Surely this is hallowed ground." We salute the MOTHER CHURCH OF SUSSEX COUNTY.

COLONIAL WILLIAM McCULLOUGH HOUSE, ASBURY



A year after the bishop's visit, Col. McCullough was instrumental in founding the Asbury Methodist Church. Bishop Asbury laid the cornerstone to the new church and soon afterward the name of the village was changed in his honor to Asbury. The bishop's final visit to the village was made on May 9, 1811. He preached and added a special exhortation, while he praised the beauty of the landscape of the surrounding area.

The home belonging to Colonel McCullough remains today in Asbury and, although remodeled in 1908 in the Colonial Revival style, retains many of the original features. The most distinctive exterior detail is the fine dentil cornice continued on the east gambel to form a small pent roof and pediment. The center hall structure of the first floor was probably built in stages and the larger interior chimney provides a fireplace in all four rooms as in many side-hall houses. Although the original first floor has been modified, the second floor retains nearly all of the original features including molded door and window trim, bead-edged baseboard, chambered six-panel doors, and three simple Georgian mantels. The adjacent barn where early Methodist services were held, however, has much of its original beams and wood floors.

This large brace-frame house overlooking the Musconetcong River in Asbury was erected by Colonel William McCullough who came to what was then called Hall's Mills in 1784 at the age of twenty-five after having served in the Revolution. Of the family that settled in the Musconetcong valley before 1754, he acquired a good deal of property and built mills at Asbury and taverns at Washington and Broadway. A prominent man, McCullough served on the Legislative Council of New Jersey and as a Judge of the Court of Common Pleas.

Col. McCullough converted to Methodism in 1786 under the influence of Ezekiel Cooper and John McClaskey and organized his first class meeting in 1787. As the class grew, it was necessary to move from his house to an adjacent barn for preaching and worship services. The colonel still used his spacious home to entertain many Methodist circuit riders including Bishop Francis Asbury who first visited in 1789.

Bishop Asbury made another visit to Asbury on July 20, 1799 and in his journal wrote, "How welcome, I rose in great pain and heat, hungry and sick, 25 miles to Col. McCullough's. How welcome a good house, kind friends, and a cold day. What is the cause of my affliction? I am at a loss to know."

DREW UNIVERSITY

Founded in 1867 as a Methodist Seminary, Drew was seen as part of the answer to a growing sense in the Methodist Episcopal Church for an educated ministry.

Daniel Drew provided the grounds and initial funds and chose Dr. John McClintock to be the first president and to start the school. McClintock was Drew's pastor at the fashionable St. Paul's Methodist Episcopal Church in New York City.

On October 16, 1867, opening day, McClintock served as President, Professor, and Registrar personally enrolling members of the first class.

In all, there were 12 students in that first class of whom but three had college degrees. There was no charge for tuition, but students were warned that they would need a minimum of \$150 per year for food.

The school was dedicated November 6, 1867, to the ringing sound of Methodist oratory. Among Bishop Edmund James' words that day were these:

"I charge the founders of this institution and the Trustees and the Faculty to see that this institution is the West Point of Methodism."

By 1914 the Seminary established a chair of Missions and Comparative Religion which was in fact the first step toward a "College of Missions" launched in 1920. And also the beginning of the enrollment at Drew of women of whom six were in that first class of nine!

In 1928 Brothers Leonard D. Baldwin and Arthur J. Baldwin of East Orange, leaders at Calvary Methodist Episcopal Church (now Calvary Roseville United Methodist Church) surprised the Drew Trustees with a gift of \$1,500,000 to found at Drew a College of Liberal Arts initially called "Brothers College" honoring the warm fraternal ties existing between Leonard and Arthur. Their portraits hang in the College Rotunda. Some "family" talk was that the "college idea" was in part hatched out in the men's Bible Class the brothers taught at their church in East Orange!

The Drew Trustees accepted the gift on Thursday, January 26, 1928 and adopted a resolution to change the corporate name to DREW UNIVERSITY! Total assets at that time were some \$5,000,000.

In 1955 while Fred Garrigus Holloway (later Bishop) was president the third of the present components of the University was established as Dr. Stanley Romaine Hopper was named Dean of the Graduate School.

Since our concern here is chiefly (though certainly not exclusively) with the relationship between Drew and Methodism, we will conclude with some summaries of the graduates of the Seminary.

By far the largest number of students come to the Theological School to prepare for service in the church, usually in ordained ministry. The great majority go on to service, either in the parish or in a special ministry. Some find secular vocations in which they express their ministries. Some create a

ministry where none existed before, doing truckstop Christian counseling, chaplaining with labor unions, leading inner city children's street theaters, etc.

Graduates from Drew have returned to every state in the United States and to many foreign nations, to serve in parishes, universities, businesses, governments, and all kinds of institutions. There is a vast network of colleagues and classmates. Many are in positions of influence and power, making decisions and policies, creating and directing, administering and supporting, and are delighted to help you succeed in your calling.

A recent survey of nearly 4,000 alumni/ae discovered the following information about their current employment:

77% are in parish ministry, or special ministries.

13% are working as teachers or professors.

2% are working in government ministries, state or federal.

2% have ministries in the health services and medicine.

1% are independent consultants in many various fields.

The honorable Thomas Kean is President of Drew and Rev. Dr. Leonard Sweet is Vice President of the University and Dean of the School of Theology. Current enrollment is 2,311 of which 313 are in the Seminary.

Sources: "University in the Forest" by John Cunningham.
The University WEB page.
University Alumni Office.

THE UNITED METHODIST HOMES OF NEW JERSEY

When one begins to write some words concerning the history of an organization, one realizes very quickly that the facts are really the stories of many people. This is true for The United Methodist Homes of New Jersey.

Beginning in Ocean Grove in the early 1900s, the idea for The Homes came into being when a "Committee of ladies," was appointed by the New Brunswick District Preachers' meeting to open correspondence with the pastors and people of the Methodist Episcopal Churches of Monmouth County in response to a long felt need to provide a home for the aged. And so the historical fact became reality because a group of people cared about the well being of others, particularly the aged.

Meanwhile, in southwest New Jersey, the "Home for the Aged and Infirm in the Methodist Episcopal Church of the County of Camden," was already almost twenty years old, having been incorporated in 1890. Known through the years as Collingswood Manor, this treasured community became part of The Homes family in 1971.



This historic front section of Collingswood Manor has been maintained and renovated and is now incorporated into the brand new facility which was opened in 1997.

Back to Ocean Grove—the first building, at 63 Clark Avenue, was purchased and seven persons were the initial residents. It was dedicated on July 24, 1907. An "annex" was added in 1910, but a fire destroyed much of the property in 1916. A new building which cost \$21,000 was built at the 63 Clark Avenue site in 1917.

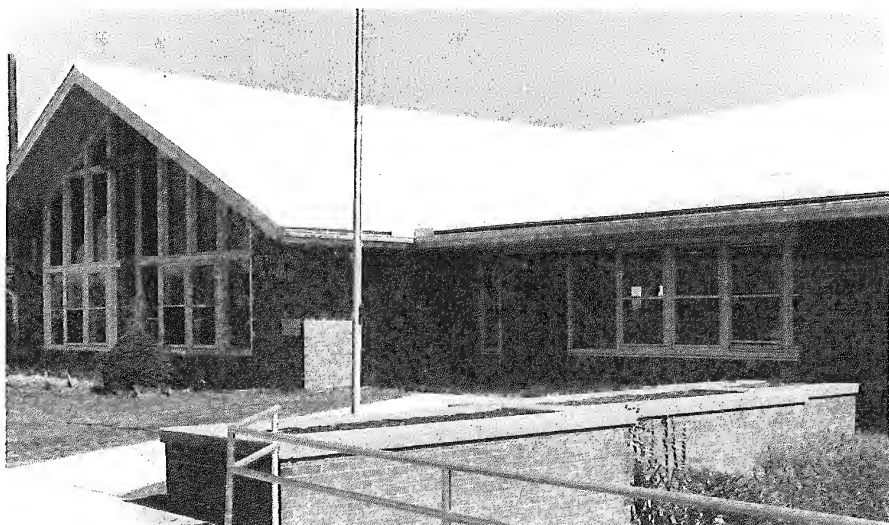
Following several additions and an increasing number of residents, the need for a new and much larger building was clear. By 1941, most of the money was raised, but World War II erupted and construction was not possible. Finally, in 1947, ground was broken for a new and wonderful Home located at 70 Stockton Avenue, to be eventually called Francis Asbury Manor. In November of 1997, residents, staff, family and friends held a joyful 50th birthday celebration in the midst of the 90th anniversary year of The Homes' corporation. This took place in the newly renovated Francis Asbury Manor, looking lovely and comfortable for today's senior men and women who seek to live in a caring Christian community.



Early days in Ocean Grove

And what about 63 Clark Avenue? The building changed hands several times, eventually returning to United Methodist Homes as Clara Swain Manor. Here persons needing skilled nursing care were provided for until the highly acclaimed and state of the art Manor By The Sea opened in Ocean Grove in late 1994. This new 120 bed community took all skilled nursing residents from both Clara Swain Manor and from the health care unit on the 5th floor of Francis Asbury Manor. Persons visiting Manor By The Sea are impressed with the emphasis on creating an atmosphere of comfort for the residents, underscoring the original premise that people caring for other people are the real history makers.

Upon receiving gifts of land both in the north and the south of New Jersey and proceeding with construction, Methodist Manor in Branchville and Wesley Manor in Ocean City welcomed residents to the hills of Sussex County and the sea scapes of Cape May County in the early 60's. The Shore at Wesley Manor, Phase I, opened in 1995 and offers single and double room apartments as this decade's seniors look for additional space and kitchenette amenities in their residential accommodations.



Methodist Manor in Branchville

Pitman Manor was opened in the early 70s, providing people in that corner of the state with another United Methodist place to continue living in the atmosphere of Christian care that has been the keystone of ministry for The United Methodist Homes of New Jersey. Pitman Manor was the first community to connect The Homes with the national government's Department of Housing and Urban Development known as HUD.

As the years of the 1980 decade progressed, new alliances were developed in ministry, joining The Homes with local churches and with other established Homes' communities. Wesley By The Bay, one block from Wesley Manor and HUD financed, provided affordable housing for lower income seniors in that area. Following the leadership of clergy and laity in two neighboring churches in East Orange, United Methodist Homes became a partner with them in a HUD community. Calvary-Roseville United Methodist Church and Christ Episcopal Church strongly supported the building of Bishop Taylor Manor, named for New Jersey Area resident Bishop, Prince Albert Taylor, Jr., who served from 1964 until 1972. Today, Bishop Taylor lives at The Shores at Wesley Manor, allowing that community to embrace him with joy and assurance in his elder years.

With the approach of a new century, United Methodist Homes continues its faithfulness, forging additional partnerships. Wesleyan Arms, to open in Red Bank, in 1998, came into being through the efforts of persons in the Shrewsbury Avenue A.M.E. Zion Church and the United Methodist Church of Red Bank who were seeking affordable housing options in their borough. The Homes willingly responded to the invitation to be a part of this endeavor as it has to the vision of the leadership and members of the Covenant United Methodist Church in Plainfield to build Covenant Housing, to open in the winter of 1998-1999. In addition to HUD, county agencies, local planning boards, the Foundation of United Methodist Homes, and church boards and committees become integral parts of the whole, all comprised of persons caring for the well being of others.

Returning to the northwest of New Jersey, plans for the building of a continuing care retirement community, named Bristol Glen, are moving swiftly ahead with groundbreaking anticipated late in 1998. Seeking to offer a full spectrum of living options for older adults, Bristol Glen will represent a new dimension of independent living, along with needed services of assisted living and skilled nursing care.

Through all these years, United Methodist Homes has been undergirded by its relationship to the churches of the New Jersey Area. This is especially true in the maintaining of the Fellowship Fund, which provides financial support for residents who are no longer able to meet the cost of residency or skilled nursing care. Gifts to this Fund typically come in amounts small and great, but always with compassion from individuals, churches, auxiliaries, foundations and residents reaching out to other residents.

History moves ahead for United Methodist Homes as people, individually or in congregations, faithfully continue to look for meaningful directions in the later years of life and for living situations which support them. In endeavoring to meet those needs, the staff and Board of Directors and Foundation Trustees of The Homes will strive to offer services both within our communities and out in the larger world. At another time in a new century, another historical narrative will tell how this ministry of people caring about other people moved into its own historical century.

"HISTORY OF THE GREAT CAMP MEETING"

William T. Noll

Among the historic papers in the archives of the Northern New Jersey Conference is a fascinating, fourteen-page, hand-written manuscript entitled "History of the Great Camp Meeting." The document, written sometime after 1879, describes two camp meetings held by Methodists in Rahway in 1818 and 1819. The author explains that he "strove to give some of the incidents which occurred at this camp meeting, some from my own observations at the time and I then and since heard related by those in attendance and by inquiry from such men as Rev. Bartholomew Weed of the Newark Conference." (pp. 10-11) Evidently, the author's reminiscences include episodes from both camp meetings. Unfortunately, the author of the document did not sign his work. Nonetheless, the manuscript gives an intriguing glimpse into what it was like to participate in such an event in New Jersey and in the early nineteenth century. In the quotes used in this paper, I have retained the grammar of the author but corrected the few obvious misspellings. Except as otherwise noted, all quotations are from the manuscript.

Camp meetings became an important part of the American evangelical Protestant experience in the first half of the nineteenth century. The first was held in Kentucky in 1800. Lasting a week or more and often drawing attendance in the thousands, camp meetings were also a major opportunity for fellowship in rural America. Families lived on the camp grounds in tents or wagons. Each day consisted of morning, afternoon and evening worship services with hymns, prayers, and a number of preachers.

In his article on "Early Camp Meetings" in the *Newark Conference Centennial History, 1857-1957*, Dr. Robert Simpson reported that the first Methodist camp meeting in Northern New Jersey was held in Parsippany in 1806.¹ According to the "History of the Great Camp Meeting," the camp meeting ground was located "in Rahway Neck near the Star Landing." (p. 1) Local Methodist Connie Brewer has found a reference to Rahway Neck on an old map of the area. It is located in Rahway along the Rahway River, east of the center of town.

Rahway was an early center of Methodism in New Jersey. According to the *Centennial History*, "Methodism was brought to Rahway in 1774 when the Rev. William Watters was on the New Jersey Circuit. . . . By 1798 a board of trustees was elected and organized. . . . A chapel was erected in 1809."²

¹"Early Camp Meetings and Mount Tabor" by Robert Simpson in *Newark Conference Centennial History, 1857-1957*, Vernon B. Hampton, editor, p. 84.

²"History of the Churches" by Frank Dennis in *Centennial History*, p. 557.

Although we do not know the name of the author of the "History of the Great Camp Meeting," we do know certain things about him. From internal evidence in the paper, we know that in 1818 he was eleven years old, living with his parents in a neighborhood known as West Brook, "near the old village of the Wheatsheaf, now Linden." (p. 3) His parents were active Methodists who housed circuit riders and hosted week night worship services in their homes. His grandfather had been an officer in the Presbyterian Church, who was nonetheless sympathetic to Methodists. By the time he wrote this manuscript, he was over seventy years old and a life-long Methodist.

The decision to hold a camp meeting in Rahway was made "after considerable consultation with the Brethren of Staten Island, Elizabeth Town and New Brunswick." (p. 1) In 1818, two preachers, George Wooley and R. W. Petherbridge, were assigned to serve "Essex County and all of Staten Island and a part of York State." (pp. 1-2) [At the time, Essex County covered Union County as well.] The presiding elder serving New Jersey was James Smyth. The next year

the whole of East and West Jersey and a part of New York State was presided over by one Elder, Lawrence McComb, and Asa Smith and Bartholomew Weed were the preachers on the circuit which included all of Staten Island and Essex County . . . (p. 1)

According to the author, Methodists at the time were "a weak and persecuted Society." (p. 1) The area "was a poor place for the Methodists to find favor or their rights protected." (p. 8) In fact, the author's grandfather was warned that "the Methodists would eat him out of house and home, and that they were in a great many instances the most dangerous class of horse thieves extant." (p. 3) The Great Camp Meeting would touch the hearts and change the minds of many of these skeptics.

At the time, camp meetings were "a great novelty in the way of meeting together to worship the Lord, although they were quite common in other localities down on Bergen Point." (p. 4) [Bergen Point is located in present day Bayonne]. Thus,

"great preparations were made by the community far and near to attend this [camp meeting in Rahway]. The time finally arrived after the people called Shouting Methodists had met and prayed both in secret and in public for months. The roads leading from almost any town, city or hamlet for some twenty five miles round [were thronged] with wagons and vehicles of all kinds from the coach to the ox cart." (p. 4)

The author remembers himself looking forward to the big event. He remembers how his parents "had pictured to me long before what good times we were going to have. . . . When the morning arrived I had to get up very early and help to get the work done . . . and I had to wash up and get

my shoes blacked. . . ." (p. 11) The shoes, called cows hide, were coarse and heavy, and "the only blacking we had for boys then was what we could scrape off the bottom of the griddle or frying pan." (p. 11) The author "put on a good supply that morning to go to camp meeting." (p. 12)

The author's father had arranged to bring a number of neighbors to camp meeting in his large "well-filled" farm wagon.

(A)mong the number was a young lady who had dressed herself in a white dress, such a pure white as I have often thought country girls alone could prepare. . . . (W)hen I made the effort to squeeze myself in, my black shoes came in contact with her white dress . . . I had lost a good amount of my blacking and her dress had lost its whiteness for a good sized strip all down, but that mishap was not of sufficient moment to prevent her from going to Camp Meeting. (p. 12)

After the Methodists had assembled at Rahway Neck,

"the first to be done was to bow before the Lord and ask his wisdom to direct in these proceedings, and his Holy Spirit to attend their efforts to do good and get good, and his grace to sustain them amid the seeming difficulties. . . . Then, the tents some Thirty or Forty being put up, the work commenced." (p. 4)

Apparently, the two camp meetings were a great success. From the perspective of our author,

it would appear that the Heavenly Host was already in waiting to open the communications of Salvation to all in attendance who would but ask and receive, for such a manifestation of the power of the Holy Ghost was seldom ever before or since felt or seen at a camp meeting. Saint and sinner lay prostrate on the ground, some shouting, some singing, salvation was literally their cry. But others lay as dead men and women, old and young, on whom the power of the Lord had fallen, their eyes turned up to heaven, their countenances shown like those which we have a description of being filled with the Holy Ghost. Men of stout heart and scoffers of the most malignant cast would stand and look amazed and were compelled to say 'strange, unaccountable this.' (pp. 4-5)

This report is noteworthy because at other camp meetings such physical expressions of emotionalism, which were a regular part of camp meetings ten or fifteen years earlier, had become quite uncommon, especially in the Northeast United States.³

Camp meeting also had its share of troublemakers. According to historian Frederick Norwood, accounts of camp meetings "are full of descriptions of troubles with 'rowdies' and the measures taken against them."⁴ The

author of the "History of the Great Camp Meeting" had his own collection of such stories. He remembered that "when it became known that the Methodists had decided to hold a camp meeting, it was ridiculed by professors in other denominations, and hurried on by non-professors, calculating on having a grand carousal and frolic and to have a good excuse to go and break up the meeting." (p. 2) The author had some fond memories of how camp meeting effected some of those who originally came to the camp meeting only to be entertained or amused.

I well remember hearing some ladies talking a few days before the meeting commenced that they intended to go and have a fine time of it. But one said that she must be careful for Mr. Bull (meaning Rev. Mitchell Bull who was a local preacher and resided in Rahway . . .) would be there and if they did not conduct themselves well he would *bull* them off the grounds. . . . One said yes, and Mr. Bangs (Rev. Nathan Bangs of the N.Y. Conference) would be there and they would get a good *banging* about to make them behave themselves, and they both went, I have no doubt, with intention of having a good time. . . . [But at] that Camp Meeting . . . truly they were led in a way they new not of before, and it so occurred that they had been on the ground but a very short time before they also felt the hand of the Lord upon them, convicting them of their awful situation as sinners of the meanest grade, not only having neglected salvation and mercy but that they had come expressly to ridicule and hinder the work of the Lord in bringing sinners to the "Fountain of Mercy. . . ." They were heard to cry out loud, and I think one was struck to the ground and lay there for more than twenty four hours, and then commenced to shout the praises of the Lord to such an extent that all who knew her could not but weep and shout, too. . . . The two ladies above mentioned lived to become an ornament in the church for some forty years. . . . (pp. 6-7)

The author also remembered some less tractable troublemakers, including a gang leader named R. C. Vaile.

(H)e was considered by all of the community (and himself also) to be the bully of this part of the country . . . [The camp meeting leaders] went to disperse [the gang] (for they had got so bold that they made an effort to tare down the tents by cutting the cord & etc.) They most all fled from them except this bully who seemed to think no 'Methodist' could handle him. . . . But Rev. Bartholomew Weed was a young man and stood full six feet or more of powerful frame. In fact, they both were about the same size, but Bro. Weed walked boldly up to him. He resisted but it was of no use, for he brought him into the preachers tent like a whipped cur. (p. 13)

It appears from this manuscript that the Great Camp Meetings of 1818 and 1819 had a significant positive effect upon Methodism in this part of

³See Frederick Norwood's *Story of American Methodism*, p. 158.

⁴Norwood, p. 159.

Northern New Jersey. Years later, the author asked Bartholomew Weed about the impact of the events. "(H)e said that there went out from them two camp meetings a power and influence for Methodism over New Jersey and a part of New York that had never before been realized and was still working good." (p. 7) They certainly had a profound influence upon many non-Methodists who attended. The author reported that

the greatest difficulty . . . was that a large number who were there situated were those they knew had all their lives discarded every principle and doctrine of the Methodist Church and its usages and had come to the camp meeting for the express purpose of ridicule and to oppose in every way the efforts to make the meeting a blessing to saint and sinner. They stood and predicted that it was a farce or delusion, while some looked and with tears starting to trickle down their cheeks would silently walk away. . . . They were compelled to admit the 'Lord was God,' and that he was in the work. (pp. 5-6)

Camp meetings were a popular evangelical event in Northern New Jersey throughout the first half of the nineteenth century. In 1866, the first Conference Camp Meeting was held at Speedwell Lake in Morristown, and two years later Mount Tabor in Morris County was established as the official Conference Camp Meeting ground.⁵ While Mount Tabor has since become a secular community, the tradition of camp meeting continues at the Jersey shore each summer at the famous Methodist resort of Ocean Grove. The Great Camp Meetings at Rahway Neck are thus a part of an ongoing history of the camp meeting tradition in New Jersey Methodism.

⁵For a history of Mount Tabor, see Mary Harriot Morris's *Camp Tabor, A Story of Camp Meeting*.